

The Reactionary Mind and the limits of Liberal Tolerance in Chris Thorpe's *Confirmation* and David Grieg's *The Events*

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In recent years, two plays in particular have engaged critically and analytically with aspects of extremism motivated by far-Right politics. David Grieg's *The Events* (2013) re-imagines a mass shooting with strong echoes of the atrocity perpetrated by Anders Breivik on the Norwegian island of Utøya; and Chris Thorpe's quasi-verbatim *Confirmation* (2014) attempts to use the theoretical frame of confirmation bias to explore the ideological beliefs of the neo-Nazi webmaster of a white supremacist website. Both plays were first performed at a high-water mark of reactionary politics in Europe, where for more than a decade extremist Right-wing ideas have been mainstreamed and the far-Right has experienced a significant growth in electoral success. While both pieces are highly instructive about the flavour of discourses amalgamated in the contemporary far-Right, each shares the additional strategy of counterposing a quintessential liberal protagonist against an extremist antagonist. In positioning a liberal against an extremist adversary, both plays perform an interrogation into the limits and liabilities of the dualistic attitude of liberal 'tolerance' that represents a 'willingness to permit the expression of ideas or interests that one opposes' (Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus, 784) while simultaneously being 'predicated on the dislike or disapproval of the "other"' (Avery, 191).

Both *The Events* and *Confirmation* are responses to the growing prevalence of Islamophobia and anti-multicultural sentiment. That centrist politicians and the Archbishop of Canterbury, let alone emergent far-Right political parties like UKIP and Pegida, now espouse pieties about immigration being a 'reasonable concern' is a testament to the reactionary narrative, germinating for decades, that through a combination of secular multiculturalism, welfarism, and lax immigration policies, Europe is a civilisation close to collapse. It from this well that the extremist antagonists of *The Events* and *Confirmation* draw, the taproots of which were famously popularised by political theorist Samuel Huntingdon's influential 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis. A riposte to Francis Fukuyama's naïve 'End of History' universalism, Huntingdon claimed in 1993 that 'the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.' (30-31) This idea was appropriated by many conservatives in the wake of the 9/11 attacks as representing a conflict between Islam and the West, with Islam configured as a deadly 'Other'. Not only has the trope since been deployed in response to 'jihadi' terrorist acts in the West since the original attack on the World Trade Centre, but it has also been used as an intellectual justification for the rejection of multiculturalism, with the clash often framed as being between European Enlightenment and Islamic 'medievalist' values. In the context of the post 9/11 'war on terror', a proximate cause of the resulting wave of Islamophobia, liberal anti-Islam ideologues have contrasted Western secular modernity with alleged Islamic backwardness and totalitarianism, while the move of choice for many more overt conservatives has been in the retrenchment of a defensive white nationalism.

The nodal point of the conjunction of contemporary Rightist paranoia of a centre-Left of social democrats and multiculturalists aiding and abetting the Islamic takeover of Europe, was when 29 year-old Norwegian Anders Breivik killed eight people by setting off a bomb outside government offices in Oslo and then shot dead sixty-nine participants of a Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer camp on the island of Utøya on the 22nd July 2011. Breivik was

influenced by a transatlantic commentariat that was comprised as equally of hard-Right counter-jihadi pundits as it was of more mainstream conservative content, and collected these influences together in his manifesto *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, a collage of autobiography, political and military strategy and plagiarised polemicism. In *2083*, Breivik he attempts to diagnose the reasons for European malaise and vulnerability and stake a claim for a twenty-first century fascism that would, through a violent resistance movement, first extirpate ‘category A and B traitors’ (‘cultural Marxists’, ‘suicidal humanists’) from the continent, with all Muslims to follow soon thereafter. *The Events* and *Confirmation* are located squarely in this terrain, in the context of a political discourse that has shifted dramatically to the Right, with extremist views increasingly seen as acceptable diagnoses of the present situation and prescriptions for its transformation. The fact that Breivik’s worldview was shaped and corroborated not only by counter-jihadi comment, but perfectly mainstream sources such as the BBC, demonstrates how far culturalist racist discourses have become validated in contemporary Europe, inculcating a perverse victimology where majority European national cultures are able to portray themselves as being under threat from foreign peoples and traditions.

David Greig’s *The Events* tells the story of the aftermath of the politically motivated mass-shooting of a community choir run by a priest called Claire, perpetrated by a character known only as The Boy, an anti-multiculturalist nativist racist. While Clare Wallace has emphasised that *The Events* is ‘[not] simply “about” Breivik’ (36), the play’s trafficking with the contemporary thematics of right-wing political extremism, particularly the complex of factors oriented around Breivik’s own avowed anti-multiculturalism, is perhaps its most striking feature.

The Events opens with The Boy addressing the audience directly, referring them back in history to the colonisation of Australia:

Imagine a boy-

An aboriginal boy –

He’s standing on the rocks of the Illawarra River just at the very moment three ships from England come sailing up the long grey waters of the cove. (11)

Reflecting on the significance of the approaching force, he enumerates the apparatuses of subjection that the colonising power will implement on their arrival: not only ‘conditions of personhood’ such as convicts and officers, but also ‘class and religion and disease and a multitude of other instruments of objectification’. (11) Concluding his exposition, The Boy asks the audience:

If you could go back in time and speak to that boy, what would you say?

You would stand on the rocks and you would point at the ships and you would say – ‘Kill them. Kill them all.’ (12)

On the most superficial level, The Boy is performing an imaginary identification, positioning himself as a contemporary palimpsest of the aboriginal which allows him to justify his militant xenophobia as necessary for protecting the security of his tribe. However, further to this, the passage is remarkably instructive about specific elements to do with the form and quality of the discourse of the extremist racist right and its favoured forms of representation. In particular, The Boy’s opening recitation strikes home because as with so much contemporary reactionary diatribe it borrows attributes from familiar leftist formulas. Specifically, the speech unsettles through its conflation of nativist racism against a putatively destabilising Other that is conveyed

with the language and sentiment of postmodern egalitarianism justice that acknowledges the fundamentally oppressive and imperialistic character of the colonial project. Like his historical aboriginal counterpart, The Boy casts himself as a defender of the purity of his tribe, exploiting an all-too-familiar nativist trope of the indigenous occupant besieged by foreign invaders. Nonetheless, that the vehicle for this toxic sentiment is compatible with standard anti-imperialistic critiques of colonialism as punitive and expropriative is very telling. The language deployed by The Boy, denoting an awareness of structural oppression, of real relationships between oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, is pressed into service for racist discourse that allows him to justify his prejudice and paint himself as a dispossessed aboriginal. In this way, the speech can be read as a prototype of the curious doubleness that characterises much right wing-sentiment. What Corey Robin calls ‘one of most interesting and least understood aspects of conservative ideology’ (49) is specifically this long-established tendency to ape the left. Robin observes that ‘conservatives may absorb, by some elusive osmosis, the deeper categories and idioms of the left, even when those idioms run counter to their official stance,’ (52) and indeed this is a tactic endorsed by the conservative academic and activist David Horowitz, one of many reactionary advocates of the theory of a Gramscian culture war being won by the left, who has encouraged the right ‘to use the language that the left has deployed so effectively in behalf of its own agendas.’ (Horowitz in Robin, 52) Writing about the ideological terrain mapped in Anders Breivik’s manifesto, writer Richard Seymour observes that Breivik:

is embryonically aware of the need to engage in hegemonic battles... As he puts it: “Copy your enemies, learn from the professionals”. Thus while “cultural Marxists” exert dominance through front organisations supporting human rights, feminism or environmentalism, so “cultural conservatives” should embrace front tactics based on alliances “against Muslim extremism”, “for free speech” and for human and civil rights”. (22)

This is Breivik’s prescribed antidote to the war being waged and won by Cultural Marxists, who, in upholding ‘multiculturalism’, have formed a treasonous power bloc within all the institutions of the state, using the doctrine of ‘political correctness’ to expropriate the White European male by exercising ‘totalitarian’ thought control and prohibiting free speech on race and culture.

Similar ideological articulations and vectors of political interpretation are observable throughout Chris Thorpe’s *Confirmation*. On the face of it, Thorpe’s aspiration is quite straightforward: the piece is ‘an attempt to have an honourable dialogue, real and imagined, with political extremism’. (Thorpe, peri-text) Operating as theoretical rationale and methodological means of enquiry throughout the piece is the notion of confirmation bias. A phenomenon identified through a mixture of cognitive science and psychology, confirmation bias describes the tendency in people to seek out and interpret information selectively in ways that confirm the beliefs that they already hold and, correspondingly, to be more dismissive of information that does not conform to their preconceptions even if it constitutes evidence that challenges them. As Thorpe puts it in the play: ‘we have evolved to be beings that see in the world evidence that supports the point of view we hold already’ (12). In *Confirmation*, the unfurling dialogue between the liberal and extremist is refracted through this prism, although over the course of the piece, Thorpe’s psychosocial exposition of confirmation bias as a theoretical abstraction gradually cedes space to a rancorous debate between himself and his ideological antagonist, where the typical liberal tendencies towards dialogue as a means to achieving understanding eventually wither on the vine. Though there is nothing inherently political in confirmation bias itself, and the notion could potentially be explored dramatically by using any topic about which there is a difference of

opinion, in *Confirmation*, Thorpe makes the play explicitly political by using it to interrogate the salience of racism in contemporary political discourse:

It's about race, in terms of the beliefs that I have and the beliefs that the person I'm talking to have and the gulf between them. It's about [...] extreme racial belief. (Thorpe, 2015)

Confirmation is a dramatic monologue, yet one where a single performer articulates two different voices. The most prominent of these is that of Thorpe himself, 'Chris': the narrator, point of identification, and participant in the very loosely framed 'journey' that the events the piece are oriented around. The other voice is 'Glen', a pseudonym that conceals the real identity of the white supremacist with whom Thorpe conducted discussions that provided the majority of the material of the piece, transcribed and redacted exactly as a verbatim piece might. As Thorpe confirms:

I'm saying the things that were said to me, and even though the piece uses them with a little bit of editing for repetition it is absolutely verbatim to what has been written or physically said. (Thorpe, 2015)

'Chris' contacts 'Glen' after meeting with Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, a book about the difficulties of bipartisanship in US politics that considers the intractable differences in worldview between conservatives and liberals. 'Chris' outlines his ambitions to Haidt:

I said that I'd come up with this idea of talking to someone with whom I profoundly disagreed. [...] Who challenged my self-defined liberalism. [...] Maybe a white supremacist. I said. Maybe someone, for example, who would defend or justify what Anders Breivik did. (23)

As reported by 'Chris', Haidt's retort to this is revealing:

The mindset you're describing isn't a set of opinions, it's a pathology [...] I think that the person you're describing is probably mentally ill. (23-24)

Haidt's evaluation, as relayed by 'Chris', is in fact exactly the same response that was collectively proffered by the anti-Islamist commentariat that sought to declare Breivik himself insane. As an attempt to dismiss Right-wing extremism as a strain of fantasy rather than to confront its objective reality, it functions as a performative statement: one that makes a claim about a reality that it seeks to bring into being through its very utterance. Thorpe's discussions with 'Glen', an interlocutor that runs a white-supremacist website, can be seen as a refutation of the strategy of merely dismissing extreme attitudes as psychological illness. This is a theme also addressed in *The Events* when Claire is halfway through her traumatised journey to understand The Boy's motivations. Here she meets with a representative of what is ostensibly a hard-right political movement – again mediated by the actor playing The Boy – who excoriates what they see as Claire's dangerously naïve multicultural openness as a jejune lifestyle affectation that she is only able to adopt because she has a lack of skin in the game: 'You enjoy exoticism as long as you feel in a dominant position. As long as your tribe is in control.' (34) The party representative reflects on the repercussions that The Boy's actions have had for their movement:

The Boy: The boy's actions have been a disaster for us.
 Claire: Why?
 The Boy: He's a madman.

Claire: A madman who believes the things you believe.

The Boy: Exactly, so by association we appear mad of extreme. (34)

Here Greig references the Right-commentariat's favoured strategy in attempting to depoliticise the Utøya massacre: the firm contention that Breivik was simply insane, thereby minimising the extent to which his actions could be said to arise from a coherent rationale. As Tad Tierz remarks, with Breivik safely pathologised, his actions could be dismissed as a form of sickness:

The emergence of someone willing to put the Right's civilizational war into action on the battlefield of Norwegian society, we were told, was not a symptom of their program but an aberration caused by faulty neurocircuitry and/or a malignant personality. (60)

Though it is still not widely known, in a section devoted to a cross-examination of himself, Breivik's manifesto actually does contain a passage where he considers the possibility that his actions will be interpreted from the perspective of psychopathology rather than ideology. Rather ironically, he forecasts that this will be a tactic deployed by those he considers his enemies rather than those with whom he shares his political tendency:

I am fully aware that the media will attempt to portray me as a nut. This is the most common strategy of combating political dissidents. I know that the cultural Marxists and the full force of the European multiculturalist mainstream media will do everything within their power to portray people like me as nothing more than delusional nut jobs. (1383)

In *Confirmation*, 'Chris' outlines a number of commonplace touchstones of the extreme right, all of which are familiar constituents of Breivik's own variant of contemporary fascism. They are conventional paranoid tropes about Muslim belligerence and intolerance, about the 'Cultural Marxist' takeover of institutions and its expression in the policing of language and thought. What then transpires is the beginning of Thorpe's 'honourable dialogue':

Glen and me start to talk quite often. We talk several times over the next few weeks on Skype. Although at this stage I don't talk to him about Breivik, at this stage I think, while his opinions on certain things are fundamentally different to mine, they are not a pathology. He doesn't seem ill.

But he is a Nazi. (30)

When 'Glen' expatiates on the root causes of his racist proclivities, and enumerates his grievances with contemporary society, he ascribes his sense of victimhood and powerlessness to the machinations of global elites that use what in his estimation are the most distinctive signifiers of difference - racial and cultural - to divide and rule the mass of people. The perversity of this viewpoint is 'Glen's' belief that it is the 'white race' that is the victim of this policy, which has some kind of quintessential homogeneity of culture that is being 'diluted'. When 'Chris' broaches the topic of Breivik with 'Glen', the white supremacist's first response is to dissemble, embarking on a diatribe about the type of bullets used in the massacre, before admitting solidarity with Breivik's cause and opinions:

I think he was right. I think he was interpreting the situation in Europe in his own way but it wasn't by any means an unreasonable way. [...] Of course he shouldn't have killed them but I understand why he did. [...] Read what he wrote. It's reasonable. You might find yourself nodding along. [...] They guy's...

he's not a madman. He called Islam like he saw it. He saw we were in a war [...] [w]e are being overrun and dismantled and our country, our continent is no longer our own. (39 - 41)

It is this sense of dispossession that may account to some degree for the recrudescence of racist discourse in contemporary Western Europe, arising as a response to the perceived relinquishment of land or living space, resources and residual cultural hegemony. As Robin elucidates:

People on the left often fail to realize this, but conservatism really does speak to and for people who have lost something. It may be a landed estate or the privileges of white skin, the unquestioned authority of a husband or the untrammelled rights of a factory owner. The loss may be as material as money or as ethereal as a sense of standing. It may be a loss of something that was never legitimately owned in the first place; it may, when compared with what the conservative retains, be small. Even so, it is a loss. (58)

In *The Events*, The Boy also considers himself dispossessed, and rationalises his animus towards his multicultural society as the defence of an indigenous monoculture rather than specific racism directed towards particular ethnic or racial groups. A self-proclaimed 'tribal warrior', the historical archetypes of Viking Berserker, Stone Age man and Aboriginal Australian with which he variously identifies are both ethnically diverse and anthropologically heterogeneous; notions of Caucasian racial superiority are conspicuously absent from the play. The Boy's declaration, 'I kill to protect my tribe' (20), based on an exclusionary affirmation of imagined indigenous belonging, is pitched against Claire's utopian assertion that the multiracial community choir that she convenes is 'all one big crazy tribe.' (68)

For the liberal protagonists of both plays the nexus between tolerance and understanding is fraught with ambiguity. Claire spends *The Events* trying to understand The Boy in order to Other him so that she can self-justify her plan to retributively murder him; Chris spends *Confirmation* wishing for the neo-Nazi fascist to be as different, alien and Other to his liberal self as it is possible to be. Claire's last-second decision not to poison The Boy might be the flaring of a conscience finally reconciled to tolerate his intolerable existence; equally it might be quintessential liberal humanist affirmation of the intolerability of murder, the moral centre of the play choosing not to degrade herself to the level of her antagonist. The Boy's oddly flat final remark, 'I think I just got a bit obsessed with aborigines...' (64) is so resoundingly unexceptional and commonplace as to generate neither the insight nor Otherness sufficient for Claire to eliminate him. In *Confirmation*, Chris becomes aware that the discussion has created disclosures that undermine the edifice of unquestioned axioms by which he lives, and withdraws from the interactions with Glen to preserve the assumptions of his heuristic worldview, in effect affirming solidarity with his own 'tribe':

I am diluting myself, talking to you.
I am losing myself and I can't fight if I lose myself. (58)

For both 'Chris' and Claire, the impetus towards understanding short-circuits the ability to tolerate. Both relinquish their attempts to understand their adversaries and must reconcile themselves to tolerating their extremist counterparts from a distance. Ultimately, as Grieg himself has said, understanding is perhaps flawed because it 'would give the perpetrators some kind of victory' (Grieg, in Herald Scotland, 2013); with that said, we are uncomfortably returned to Žižek's familiar formulation of tolerance as an ideological category, where political differences

are redefined as cultural proclivities that are matters of beliefs and practices that must be afforded respect rather than properly challenged. *The Events* and *Confirmation* prove this precisely: tolerance might be the method by which racism is managed in society, but it is also a mechanism that prohibits its diagnosis and its remedy.

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